DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 158 SO 029 223

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TITLE Real Gender Differences: The Feminist's Fear.
PUB DATE 1997-03-08
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Southeastern Meeting of the American Women in Psychology (Hilton Head, SC, October, 1995), and at the Annual Meeting of the American Women in Psychology (Pittsburgh, PA, March, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Differences; *Females; *Feminism; *Feminist Criticism; Higher Education; Sex Bias; *Sex Differences; Sex Discrimination; Sex Stereotypes; Social Science Research; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of behavioral and biological research that implicates real gender differences as a basis for stereotypical behavior patterns of men and women. A commentary follows that addresses the reactions to the findings by some feminist psychologists and by those feminists who advocate women's rights in the popular press and other media. The focus is on the potentially damaging results to women's causes already losing ground in some quarters of society. The popular feminist leaderships' refusal to acknowledge the research as useful and valid adds to a growing belief in many young women that the Feminist Movement is too radical and irrational for them. The paper concludes with suggestions for mitigating the negative backlash that is occurring as a result. Contains 15 references. (EH)

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Real Gender Differences: The Feminist's Fear

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March 8, 1997

SO 029 223

Real Gender Differences: The Feminist's Fear

Abstract

Substantial advances in every part of American society are being forged by women, in large part due to the Feminist Movement of the sixties and seventies. However, statements made by a few feminists regarding provocative research findings in human development have implications that may serve to undermine the feminist vision of an empowered and equitable future for women.

The research in question identifies differences in men's and women's brains that may underlie significant gender differences in human behaviors. Rather than recognize an important addition to human knowledge, some influential feminists are proclaiming that the studies must be curtailed. They allege that the political outcomes of identified gender differences will result in a loss of empowerment for women and a return to the days when women were considered less than men.

I take issue with the feminist political agenda. While I support the right to challenge any research findings, I oppose the suppression of information for any reason. Repressing information has never advanced a human cause or promoted a worthwhile vision. I maintain that ignorance, not knowledge, is responsible for past inequities against women and other minorities. By attempting to obstruct scientific research, a few feminists are guilty of promoting the same kind of fearful bias and ignorance that allowed unjust differential attitudes to be perpetuated against women in the past. Suppressing knowledge out of fear is an historically poor avenue to human enrichment and

runs counter to a truly feminist vision of equity for all. Moreover, by refusing to acknowledge gender research as potentially valuable, the feminists infer that there are indeed gender differences so important that they must be kept hidden since they would automatically denote the inferiority of women.

Women still have a long way to go before they share equity and power unconditionally with men. This fact is only too evident in today's public schools where girls are educated differently and less well than boys in spite of the best intentions. There endures in this society, a pervasive and insidious cliché that being male is somehow better than being female. The idea of gender differences as strengths in males and deficits in females persists and serves as a basis for generating negative value judgments about women in comparison to men. This belief is a fallacy but so is the insistence that there are no gender differences at all. Insistence that the genders are equal in all respects has not dispelled the traditional stereotype.

There is nothing to be gained from quashing valid information. Data supporting real gender differences should encourage awareness of the need to accommodate those differences. Knowledge of gender differences has the potential to promote real equity through improved understanding of individuals' needs and to meet those needs fairly and equitably.

Thinking women and men applaud the struggles and successes of feminists to bring about much needed social change in a relatively short period of time. However, there are many others

who will use the feminists' dissent to further extend an agenda that serves to undermine women's aspirations and achievements. That cause might be advanced as women's popular leadership falls prey to hysteria. The vision of a feminist future forged by empowered women can best be championed through research tempered with reason.

Introduction

In this paper, I present a brief overview of behavioral and biological research that implicates real gender differences as the basis for stereotypical behavior patterns of men and women. A commentary follows that addresses the reactions to the findings by some feminist psychologists and by those feminists who advocate women's rights in the popular press and other media. The focus is on the potentially damaging results to women's causes already losing ground in some quarters of society. The popular feminist leadership's refusal to acknowledge the research as useful and valid adds to a growing belief in many young women that the Feminist Movement is too radical and irrational for them. In conclusion, I present suggestions for mitigating the negative backlash that is occurring as a result.

Overview of Research Findings

Gender research may be categorized as behavioral or biological. Behavioral gender research described by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) examined male and female behavior patterns for cognitive abilities, personality traits, and social behaviors. Differences regarding verbal/language facility and visual-spatial tasks indicated that females had an advantage in the former skill and males in the latter, that males were more proficient in mathematics than girls, and that boys were more field independent than girls (Halpern, 1992). Research on personality suggested that boys across many cultures were more aggressive than girls, and girls were generally more nurturing, conforming, and pro-

social than boys (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). However, some researchers since 1974 have attempted to play down preliminary conclusions related to gender differences (Hyde, 1984; Hyde & Linn, 1988; Hyde, Fennema, & Lamon, 1990). Overall, research conducted since the 1970s has attempted to negate the existence of differences between males and females (Eagly, 1995).

Psychologists studying gender have tended to interpret any indication of differences (the variance accounted for by the experimental variable) far more timidly than research conducted in other psychological arenas. Statistics that would have supported the experimental hypothesis in studies of less controversial issues have been described in some gender studies as null or only small (Eagly, 1995; Eagly & Wood, 1991). The consequence of this indecision seems to have been a fundamental insecurity, uneasiness, and reluctance to report results as representative of real gender differences.

The differences that have been reported are parallel to society's stereotypes about typical male and female behaviors (Blitchington, 1984). Identified differences, substantial enough that they can not be ignored, have been attributed to discrepancies of environmental influences, in particular, socialization practices. And of course, environmental effects have a considerable impact on behavior.

Psychologists studying the parent/child relationship have observed real differences in the way mothers and fathers interact with their boy and girl babies. However, conclusions have not

been reached concerning the causes of these differential responses. There are indications that girl babies tend to orient their attention differently than do boys and this characteristic may elicit a differential responses in the caretakers. Of course, learned expectations about gender behavior must also play a part in differential responses.

By the time children start school, they have realized a gender identity and often exhibit many of the conventional gender specific behaviors associated with being female and male in our society. Many of these children come from homes where enlightened parents have consciously attempted to socialize their daughters and sons with out regard for gender. Yet gender specific behavioral differences have prevailed in spite of the best intentions. In such cases, something other than (or in tandem with) environment is operating to cause these observed behavioral differences.

Sadker and Sadker (1994) documented many instances of differential treatment of the genders in school rooms across the country. Many of the gender transgressions reported were unfair, deliberate, and unwarranted. In other cases, the teachers were unaware that they had treated boys and girls differently. However, many teachers have tried to mete out gender equitable treatment of the children in their care but stereotypical behaviors occur anyway. Behavioral psychologists have long realized that caretakers and educators respond to subtle cues from individual children resulting in differential treatment.

What is less clear is whether these cues are learned by the child or based in biology. It seems somewhat naive to believe that stereotypical behaviors are totally due to environmental learning exclusive of biological potential.

In many of the behaviorally based studies of gender differences, researchers have failed to acknowledge that even small differences may have practical significance regardless of their causes. It has been politically expedient to negate the magnitude of research results in favor of a political and social agenda heralding no differences between the sexes. Such a policy has been exploited by the Feminist Movement to challenge differential treatment of the sexes as unwarranted and illegal. The policy has been successful in improving women's status and access to opportunities previously denied them because of their sex.

However, repeated efforts to validate the no difference hypotheses have resulted in findings that more than implicate biology as an influence on some behaviors, of some individuals, in some contexts, some of the time (Halpern, 1992). Meta-analyses for effect size indicate that much psychological study permits conclusions supporting the presence of significant gender differences for some behaviors (Eagly, 1995; Eagly & Wood, 1991). In addition, research of a physiological nature examining differences in male and female brains provides evidence that gender differences do exist and these differences impact men's and women's behaviors in important ways (Brain Sex, 1992).

Gender research focussing on the biology of the brain examines the possibility of innate structural variations of male and female brains that are the result of genetic activity and/or hormonal influences (Gorski, 1980; Hood, Draper, Crockett, & Petersen, 1987). Apparently, there are at least seven structures in the brain now known to differ significantly in males and females (Neufeld, 1994). These structures may be involved in gender-related behavioral traits ranging from left-handedness to homosexuality.

Not only do some structures differ, brain activity during cognitive tasks also differs for men and women (Brain Sex, 1992). Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) reveals that women's brains are "hot"; brain activity during a given task extends over many surfaces of the brain. Men's brain activity during the same task appears to be more localized. It seems that women and men use different parts of their brains to process and solve problems, use language, and orient themselves in space. Whether the variations are inherently determined or influenced by different socialization practices providing more task specific opportunities for one sex over another has not yet been explained.

Of considerable interest in the study of gender differences is the research pointing to the influence of hormones on the developing brain which may account for gender differences in behavior. Levels of male hormones (androgens), specifically testosterone, are known to fluctuate during gestation with

resulting impact on the developing embryo. The consensus is that all zygotes or beginning embryos are female. Subtle signals depending on the chromosomal configuration of the embryo (46XY, male or 46XX, female) result in the presence or absence of periodic testosterone peaks in utero. Although the mechanism is not well understood, the first wave of testosterone occurs about six weeks following conception if the embryo is genetically male resulting in subsequent development of primary male sex characteristics. Most female embryos do not experience this flood and develop as "normal" females. However, some female embryos are exposed to above the usual amount of testosterone in utero and are subsequently identified with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH).

About 1/10,000 female embryos exposed to above normal levels of testosterone in utero result in girl babies with CAH. CAH girls are female in every way but they tend to exhibit behaviors often associated more with males than with females, i.e., they are considered tomboys.

Another condition, Turner Syndrome is a genetic anomaly with the chromosomal configuration of 45XO occurring in approximately 1/2000 female births. Turner Syndrome girls have underdeveloped ovaries that preclude development of the minute quantities of testosterone found in normal 46XX females. Turner girls are sterile, do not develop secondary female sex characteristics without hormone therapy, and yet have been described as ultra feminine, or over-endowed with stereotypical female behavioral

characteristics. Although they are usually within the average range for intelligence, Turner girls exhibit deficits in spatial abilities and directional sense attributed to the lack of hormones, especially testosterone in their systems. Turner girls demonstrate very clearly the crucial influence of hormones on the developing organism during gestation with implications for understanding gender differences in subsequent behaviors.

Although the research on brain differences is controversial, it appears less prone to assertions that gender distinctions are trivial than are the strictly behavioral studies. For whatever reasons, many feminists in the psychological community are being persuaded that real, psychological gender differences do exist. Some have reacted to the burgeoning evidence of real gender differences by endorsing the positive aspects of stereotypical female traits. Typically female characteristics of nurturing and facility in relationship skills are considered more attractive than characteristics such as aggression often attributed to men (Hare-Musten & Marecek, 1988). Other psychologists are beginning to admit there are fundamental errors in reasoning that led to the no difference hypothesis adopted by the Feminist Movement (Eagly, 1995).

Unfortunately, the lay public is not often privy to scientific and psychological research findings first hand. The public sector relies on a media and news system which is past master in the art of sensationalism for public appeal. Therefore, the sound voices of an Alice Eagly or a Diane Halpern

are not heard. Instead, the public hears the feminist views of a celebrated few like Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, and Gloria Allred. These leaders, writers and advocates of women, and countless others deserve eternal gratitude for publicizing and directing the successful Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 70s. However, these same feminists, dear to the popular press for publicly stating opinions that sell papers, maintain their conviction in the no difference position. They have reacted vehemently to the body of research that refutes the original claim of no gender differences. It is this reaction which will prove damaging to women overall.

Feminist's Reactions

Women's Rights advocates like Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem were instrumental in forging the Feminist Movement and popularizing the no difference hypothesis so zealously protected up to now. Public acceptance of this idea led to important social and political changes in favor of rights for women. As long as the psychological research presented null or inconclusive evidence of gender differences, the popular feminist leaders were on solid ground in demanding wage and opportunity equality for women. Some institutions were literally forced to use "reach down" policies to insure that women were hired to do jobs previously reserved for men. This entailed relaxing physical requirements such as weight, height, and strength measures, or "social norming" for occupations in police work, fire-fighting and the military. Most women now in those jobs are every bit as

successful as men and they have the Women's Movement to thank for the opportunity to realize their success.

However, the popular feminists perceive that their platform is under attack by the suggestion that real gender differences do exist. Steinem, in an interview with John Stossel (Neufeld, 1994) said it is "the remnant of anti-American crazy thinking to do this kind of research. It is what's keeping us down, not what's helping us". Allred, a feminist lawyer in the same broadcast, added that the media should not be allowed "to discuss the research findings. . . . It is an attack on women." One could hope, given the proclivity of the media to distort and misquote that these comments were taken out of context; however, the suspicion is strong that these women really feel as their comments imply. Unfortunately, the sentiments are illogical and not worthy of these intelligent women.

That the feminist platform is under attack is a reality when one considers a Congress and those Far Right Establishments that continually and insidiously attempt to undercut needed programs and legal recourse for women and children. However, to insist that gender research itself is harmful, that it must be stopped and the findings thus far be refuted is wrong. To quell what could potentially result in greater understanding and accommodation of gender differences to facilitate even more opportunities for women is fundamentally dangerous. It smacks of deceit and elitism. Withholding or suppressing scientific findings has rarely, if ever, advanced any human cause throughout

history. In fact, such attempts have more often had unfortunate results.

The feminists' reaction implies that important differences between women and men do exist and if acknowledged, would automatically denote the superiority of men over women. This reflects the traditional view of gender differences, that male traits are best and differences from this norm are deficits. The popular feminists appear to be in agreement with this point of view in their insistence that we must lie about differences, keep them hidden, or say they do not exist. Since gender differences are more than an intuitive reality, the feminist's position loses credibility. An ideology which refuses to adapt its doctrines in the face of valid evidence is a mockery. In this light, the ideology of the Feminist Movement is as much a travesty as the traditional ideology that for so long forced women to endure inferior status in comparison to men.

Any doctrine based on untruths belies a self-serving credo in spite of assertions made to the contrary. A faulty doctrine perpetuates myths. The traditional hype that women were to be honored and protected (read controlled and kept subservient) is no worse under these circumstances than the popular feminist's dogma that women should and must do anything that men can do. The result under either belief system has produced and continues to produce feelings of inadequacy in many women. Some women simply do not want to do what men do. Both the traditional view that women are less than men and the feminist view that women are

the same as men are based on a misconception that gender differences are more relevant than individual differences. It is a better contention that gender differences are irrelevant in comparison to individual differences.

In spite of open and partly open doors to previously male only arenas, many women prefer to play a more traditional female role. But, these women have been made to feel guilty by some feminists for acting on this preference even though it was their choice. Some feminists looked at a woman's preference to stay home with scorn. Some women entered the male world reluctantly because it was expected that every woman would take advantage of the new freedoms afforded her. However, freedom without choice is not freedom. True freedom is empowerment to choose from all of society's options the best course of action for the individual. Unfortunately the Feminist Movement has not yet succeeded in making this a reality.

In fact, it has been difficult for many people to ignore gender differences. Physical differences are obvious; but characteristics of nurturing, aggression, conformity, and preferences for certain activities have long been recognized as more or less gender specific. All in all, we have been fairly accurate in our perceptions of female and male traits throughout the ages (Werner & LaRussa, 1985). Gender research in both psychology and physiology only reveals what many people have always perceived from years of observation and interaction with each other -- the sexes are different.

Research findings that confirm the existence of gender differences are not harmful in and of themselves. Using research results to promote differences as deficits is harmful. Those in power have long used and misused information in ways to protect their own social, political, and personal agendas thus assuring themselves of more power. Differences have been unquestionably committed to deficits, and bias and ignorance have flourished. The end has justified the means for maintaining the status quo. It appears that the popular feminist leadership now subscribes to the same dogma that it has struggled to overthrow for so many years, that the status quo must be maintained. It is high time honesty prevailed. Far too much has been accomplished by the Women's Movement to let its fundamental spirit be overcome by irrational and irresponsible thinking.

Now that research points towards real gender differences, Abzug (in Neufeld, 1994) has stated, "Institutions have to adjust. If there are still physical problems which prevent certain activities, (from being carried out by women) those activities should be assisted in a way with technology so that it's possible". She has acknowledged the possibility that some fundamental physical differences between men and women may not be overcome without interventions. However, the differences can not be surmounted with technology or by social institutions if those differences are not first recognized and understood.

As a teacher, I want to know if identified gender dissimilarities impact how I react to my students, how I teach

them, and in how they might best learn. In other words, I want all the valid information I can get in order to accommodate the diversity in my students. I must make instructional decisions based on what is, not on someone else's interpretation of what should be. Scientific knowledge is not harmful; its misuse is harmful.

Overall, feminist psychologists have been honest, even gracious in accepting the idea that gender differences are a reality. But, much more must be said and done by that element of society in order to counteract the damage being done by the militant among us. There are many unenlightened who pack considerable influence, influence that strives to undermine the status and rights of women, including some women themselves. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is a case in point. Those with a public voice will try to use the knowledge of gender difference to serve their own means whether those means are religious, political, or economic. Even more insidious is the tendency I perceive of the younger generation to take equal rights for granted, or worse, to mock the Movement that won those rights for all of us.

It is amazing how little young men and women of today know about the early struggles of the feminists and their predecessors in history to achieve equality for women. We as parents, teachers, and scientists have been remiss in not nurturing this awareness. The media has not been helpful either. Feminists in every field have been denigrated and ridiculed and many young

women do not wish to align themselves with what are depicted at times, to be ludicrous organizations. Countless stories reported in the popular press succeed in undermining the absolute morality of the feminist cause.

One such story appeared a few years ago in our local paper. It described the involvement of NOW and the ACLU in successfully challenging a Texas high school's policy banning pregnant cheerleaders from continuing in their cheering capacity. However, the story was written so as to make the two organizations' involvement look unwanted and ridiculous. Ignored was the bottom line that the school's policy discriminated unfairly against women. Since most gynecologists advocate continuing one's usual activities well into the third trimester of pregnancy as long as health is not a mitigating factor, the decision to continue cheering should have been made by the girl in conjunction with her physician. Furthermore, it takes two to make a pregnancy and there was no policy barring prospective fathers from taking part in any school activities. On this point alone, the school's policy was biased.

However, instead of looking objectively at the situation, my students sided with the school. They did not connect this isolated incident with the larger theme that constant vigilance in every corner of society is demanded in order to realize the vision of equal rights for women. Sadly, the students experienced only what the writer of the story had intended -- a mockery of the feminist groups.

A serious point regarding the situation in the Texas school was that four teenage girls were pregnant. Unmarried teenage pregnancy is a problem to be tackled under the rubric of women's rights. A prevailing attitude in our society is that pregnancy is the woman's responsibility. Many men who impregnate women outside of marriage do not recognize the connection between pregnancy and the responsibility of fatherhood. In conjunction with this defective attitude is the certainty of the Religious Right that abortions should be illegal and a Congress which acts to cut spending for programs that would benefit women and children. Thus, women bear the responsibility with fewer and fewer options. Given the numbers of single mothers and children living in poverty with little hope of changing their circumstances, the issue is crucial.

This past semester, I surveyed over 150 education students in their junior and senior years and learned how little my students think about Feminism and its impact on them. Many students equated feminism with "male-bashing" and/or "lesbians". These students, men and women, regard the Feminist Movement as outside of their realm. They do not recognize the real implications that equality, or lack of it, will have on their lives. Especially frightening to me is that they do not seem to realize how fragile are their rights won thus far.

In my opinion, the feminists' refusal to acknowledge scientific knowledge and their insistence that it be refuted in order to protect a faulty doctrine undermines their credibility

and takes attention away from the invaluable things they do accomplish. This attitude provides ample fodder for continued slurs that result in negativity and hostility from the very group the feminists wish to protect. And, if my students' comments are any indication, there may be few women in twenty or thirty years to carry on the vision of a feminist future.

As much as we would like to be seen as the most progressive and prosperous nation in the world, this is simply not true. Women are still treated as devalued citizens in this society. There are some fathers who may be mildly annoyed by "tomboy" behaviors in their daughters but there are many more fathers who are pleased by stereotypical male behaviors in their daughters. The opposite is not true. In general most fathers react badly to feminine, so-called "sissy" behaviors in their sons. This is a direct result of our society's continued devaluation of women and the roles that women have typically played. The very words "tomboy" and "sissy" evoke different levels of tolerance in most people.

The Feminist Movement has made great strides towards overcoming this reality but it has not yet succeeded. Refusal to acknowledge gender differences will further undermine the value of women in this country. The hysterical outcry of the popular feminists serves to reinforce the negative stereotype held by some that women are too emotional and not rational enough to warrant equal access to positions of power.

Thoughts On What We Might Try To Do

On a certain level, one can not help but sympathize with the popular feminists. But, their stand on real gender differences is irrational. Rather than waste energy attempting to refute the inevitable, it would be far more advantageous to switch allegiance to a platform which fights for equality on the basis of individual differences. The present climate will divide and weaken us. Continued diligence is necessary to protect what has already been won. In addition, renewed efforts must be implemented to continue the battle for equality and empowerment of women. We must stop taking our rights for granted. This cause requires active participation by all thinking persons, women and men.

Psychologists must be vigilant in making sure that the media report research findings accurately and fairly and if not, we should insist on prominent retractions. We need to be spreading the word ourselves in popular magazines, television, radio, and the information highway. Let's face it, the public does not read our venerated journals. It is not enough to share only with each other; we must also "reach down" if that is a fair term to use. We must inform women and men at every level in society if we truly believe that knowledge is empowerment and we must empower women in society if we intend to forge a truly feminist future. We must become more public in defense of those findings which indicate gender differences but, we must stress even more the importance of individual differences.

That the unenlightened are so prevalent among us indicates that those mothers and caregivers since the Women's Movement began have not taught their daughters and sons the message of feminism. As mothers, some of us have been remiss. Mothers must instill in their daughters AND in their sons that individual differences are far more important than gender differences. Women must be encouraged to stand up to fathers, brothers, boyfriends, husbands, and yes, mothers who would deny their right to explore those possibilities that fit their unique talents.

Women must have the courage to risk the "B" word and make clear to the significant men in their lives that they will not tolerate a double standard and undeserved subservient role any longer. Moreover, women must stand up to the men in their lives who would perpetuate the old attitudes in their daughters and sons.

The old double standard prevails in too many male/female relationships. Many otherwise intelligent, educated, independent women still succumb to the notion that men should have the last word and that a woman's duty is to keep the peace. In other words, men continue to make the major decisions; and, men still exercise the power. The growing cases of domestic violence across socio-economic lines support this claim. Many men still consider their wives and girlfriends their property and many others pay only lip service to the notion of gender equality. Many women continue to endure this traditional, irrational legacy.

Women must demand the esteem to which they are entitled no matter which life paths they choose. Mothers especially should model for their children any way they can the most beautiful idea in feminism -- choice.

Choice is a personal matter. Both sexes should enjoy equal access to choices but the choice factor is influenced by individual differences far more than gender differences. It is apparent to me that many young women and men have not gotten the message that they have opportunities to choose avenues formerly denied them because of the Women's Movement. However, if we women do choose to attempt nontraditional roles, we must be prepared. We must take responsibility for our choices. And, until power is shared unconditionally with men, we do not need any more Shannon Faulkner fiascos. In addition, feminists must continue to force this society to uphold and protect women's rights. I agree with Gloria Allred's statement that we need more lawsuits to do just that. Attitudes change only after behaviors change.

However, it may be time to broaden the feminist outlook to embrace individual rights. We should change from a platform of gender equality to equity for individuals. The militant stand that gender differences do not exist has served an important but initial purpose. We must adopt the idea that no gender difference is important enough to prevent women from enjoying equal rights with men. If we wish to forge a truly feminist future, we should move on with this conviction.

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